

# **Walking on Tippy Toes: Lesbian and Gay Liberation Documentary of the Post- Stonewall Period 1969-1984**

Thomas Waugh

Mother: It started actually in high school. You were in the plays in high school and did a beautiful job. And that's why I think that speech and drama was a very good start for you...

Father: Well, all I can say is I think that you get mixed up in the drama, the music and the arts of that type, I think it's a... most people have a tendency toward that type of thing that... Maybe I'm wrong. I don't know anything about statistics, I've never looked it up but most people who are in arts and drama are walking on tippy toes, a little fluttery, you understand what I mean. When I was a kid, the guys that played the violin, with the long hair, that kind of stuff, they were a little more effeminate than most people, so when you get mixed up with the arty people, that's it. You just join the gang, I guess.

--from Tom Joslin's Blackstar:  
Autobiography of a Close Friend (1977).

## **Introduction: Years of Famine**

"The famine is over." Uttering these portentous words in 1980 from my podium as a gay movement film critic, I declared the start of a new era of visibility and productivity in lesbian and gay film. I recently sifted through a decade's worth of my once-urgent dissections of the state of gay cinema (c. 1976-1985), denunciations of various capitalist-homophobe conspiracies from within and without and overstated celebrations of each new "breakthrough," and was reminded of how desperate it felt in those days before there were Queer Film and Video Festivals in every city and twenty year old queers with video cameras at every gathering. "Famine", "drought", "silence" and "invisibility" were indeed the words that self-styled cine-pinko-fags like myself used to describe the audio-visual environment in the first decade after Stonewall.

Perhaps my own frustration was exacerbated because the post-Stonewall famine had coincided, paradoxically, with an age of feasting for the 16mm social-issue documentary film. From Harlan County U.S.A. to Union Maids, from The Sorrow and the Pity to The Battle of Chile, what a thrilling trajectory it was for artists and audiences who wanted to change the world with images of reality! So why, as I started assembling an anthology on "committed documentary" in 1980, could I not include a single gay male documentary in my "radical" corpus, and manage to squeeze in only a single, discreet lesbian-authored short that addressed sexual orientation as part of a spectrum of feminist issues? For my next two attempts to assemble a more inclusive body

of lesbian and gay documentary, a 1982 lesbian and gay film and video festival and a 1983 curriculum package, the pickings were still very slim. By then I could draw on the eclectic mixture of 16mm documentary shorts that was only beginning to accumulate in 1980-81, topped off by some uneven work in Super 8 and community video, and fleshed out by ambiguous films by feminists who were not yet willing or ready to claim publicly the L-word label. Why had there been no queer Harlan County?

My international working filmography for this article, about 25 pre-1984 documentaries may now seem too ample to justify the word "famine". Famine is of course relative (African American documentarists were then an even scarcer breed than lesbians and gays) but the lesbian and gay corpus of the 1970s is indeed tiny, dispersed and erratic compared say to the sustained wealth of women's movement imagemaking in Europe and North America at the same time. A 1978 review of *Gay U.S.A.* and *Word is Out* by Lee Atwell, one of the decade's handful of visible gay critics of any stature, mentioned two obvious reasons for the six-year gap between the promising *Some of Your Best Friends* (1971) and *Word is Out*:

Large segments of the gay populace feared any sort of public exposure that might mean loss of jobs, friends and/or family support. Simply getting an openly gay woman or man to appear before a camera was a primary difficulty. And secondly, the difficulties in financing a nonsensational (non-commercial) treatment of the subject was virtually insurmountable.

Aside from the lingering closet and the unorganized apparatus for financing, distribution, and criticism, other obvious factors were in play. With regard to the U.S. infrastructure, it took some time for Carter-era liberalism to penetrate the blackout in public broadcasting and in the funding bodies. The invisibility of lesbians and gays within the still largely homophobic Left and New Social Movements networks persisted and it was only in the eighties that the alternative distribution outfits, for example Toronto's DEC, would take on gay and lesbian titles. Meanwhile future troupers of 1980s lesbian and gay documentary were tactfully present within leftist and feminist organizations: Richard Schmiechen and Margaret Westcott, for example, were still quietly at work at Chicago's Kartemquin Collective and Montreal's Studio D respectively. It was only on the tenth anniversary of Stonewall at the 1979 Bard College Alternative Cinema Conference that North American lesbian and gay media activists actually came together for the first time and surprised the straight left attendance with their unified demands, including that alternative distributors "seek out, distribute, and encourage the production of media made by lesbians and gay men." The rightwing backlash of the late seventies fanned the new militancy all the more: Atwell thought that the 1977 Dade County catastrophe (Anita Bryant) had sparked socially conscious filmmakers like artsy pornmaker Artie Bressan to get on the bandwagon, and California's 1978 Briggs Initiative was the catalyst of what would eventually be *The Times of Harvey Milk*. Suddenly at the turn of the decade, there did seem to be a few more documentary projects in sight, especially in the United

States and Canada, films which would be able to get away with being underfunded, mediocre, local or single-issue because they were no longer solitary voices in the wilderness.

In 1984 I came to write an overview article on post-Stonewall documentary, eventually published in 1988. By that time my sampling had swelled to twenty-four documentaries from six countries, but most were titles from the first half of the eighties and seven were dated 1977, 1978, or 1979. The only earlier film was *It is Not the Homosexual Who is Perverse but the Situation in which he Lives*, the unique 1971 jeremiad by Rosa von Praunheim, the Berliner who (symptomatically) would go on to make the best documentary of U.S. Gay Liberation, *Army of Lovers or Revolt of the Perverts* (1978). In addition to discussing particular problems around community accountability and (self-) censorship, I argued that distinctive aesthetic strategies had evolved in response to the ethico-political challenges of the identity politics and volatile audience dynamics of a minority steeped in what Jack Babuscio called "the passing experience." Among these strategies, I inventoried particular approaches to creative collaboration such as collective authorship and consultative procedures. Most importantly, I noticed performance-based techniques for incorporating the input of subjects into the process and for filling in gaps left by conventional documentary methods. Parents of gay filmmakers of the 1970s thought that performance had something to do with homosexuality, as we have seen, and indeed their sons and daughters seemed to bear this out. Their performance-based techniques included particular inflections of standard interviewing, editing and expert testimony styles, "coming out" variations of consciousness-raising formats borrowed from women's movement documentaries, and expressive elements that were more theatrical than the standard documentary idiom of the day allowed: dramatization, improvisatory role-playing and reconstruction, statements and monologues based on preparation and rehearsal, and non-verbal performances of music, dance, gesture and corporal movement, including those of an erotic and diaristic nature.

What I didn't realize in 1984 was that I was summing up the first generation of lesbian and gay documentary. Nor did I realize that by squeezing in the first works of 1984 and 1985 by lesbians and gays of color, the first few references to AIDS, and *The Times of Harvey Milk* (whose 1985 Oscar seemed to symbolize once and for all the real end of famine), I was heralding the next period of what Richard Dyer calls "post-affirmation" cinema, to be marked not only by the Epidemic and postcolonial voices but also by a discursive flux around issues of identity. Looking back now from the vantage-point of 1995, I am struck not only by the diversity of this corpus that once seemed so sparse, but also even more that performance-based aesthetics was its distinctive contribution and its most important link with the queer nonfiction film and video of the late eighties and nineties. I would therefore like to devote the rest of this space to extending my reflection on performance as the crucial idiom of the years of famine.

## Performance and Performativity

First I need to define more precisely what performance means as a documentary ingredient. The commonsense, layperson's notion of documentary is as a window on an unscripted, undirected, unrehearsed and unperformed reality. Nevertheless, as I have argued elsewhere, performance and mise-en-scene have been a basic syntax of realist discourse throughout the entire 100-year documentary tradition:

Performance—the self-expression of documentary subjects for the camera in collaboration with filmmaker/director—was the basic ingredient of the classical documentary.

And not only of the classical documentary: throughout the modern phases of documentary as well—if we use Nichols's neat but useful categories, the observational impetus of the sixties (Leacock, Wiseman), the interactive impetus of the seventies (de Antonio, New Day Films), and the self-reflexive impetus of the eighties (Trinh, Marker)—collaborative performance has maintained its centrality in the lexicon of documentary realism. This has been consistently true of that vast majority of documentary productions where subjects have been aware, actively or passively, of the camera and by extension of the spectator.

Perform-words are very popular in both gender/queer theory and documentary theory these days, and a few overlaps must be sorted out before I proceed. Slippages between the two principal relevant dictionary senses of the word performance—the execution of an action and "a public presentation or exhibition"—can be as confusing as they are stimulating. The term "performative", deriving from the first sense and borrowed from speech act linguistics, defines a category of utterance that executes, enacts or performs the action that is uttered, for example, I apologize, I sentence, I welcome, or the I do of the marriage ceremony. Hence Judith Butler's theory that "gender reality is created through sustained social performances," that maleness or femaleness are "performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means."

Similarly, Bill Nichols posits performative documentary as a dominant of nineties documentary, reflected in such films as *Sari Red* and *Tongues Untied* that are not only referential (or constative to continue the speech act terminology) but primarily performative. Like an utterance that not only describes but executes a transformation in the relationship of speaker and listener,

"[performative documentaries] address us...with a sense of emphatic engagement that overshadows their reference to the historical world..."

"mak[ing] their target an ethics of viewer response more than a politics of group action or an analysis of the ideology of the subject... Performative documentary attempts to reorient us—affectively, subjectively—toward the historical, poetic world it brings into being."

However, as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains with regard to Butler's gender theory, the term "performative" seldom loses the connotation of performance as exhibition and presentation— in short, theater— primarily because Butler maintains the

"apparently unique centrality of drag performance practice as— not just the shaping metaphor— but the very idiom of a tautologically heterosexist gender/sexuality system, and the idiom also of the possibility for its subversion."

Nichols as well maintains this connection to theater in the sense that most of his prototype performative films are those documentaries relying on dramatization and self-conscious theatricality (including several, incidentally, that have become canonical paving stones of the new international queer documentary, by Pratibha Parmar, Isaac Julien, and Marlon Riggs). Nichols also names as an ancestor "the avant-garde tradition of autobiography that coincides in many aspects with the confessional quality of a number of performative documentaries" and mentions as an example Kenneth Anger (though omitting two other performer precursors of queer documentary, Jack Smith and Andy Warhol). Although Butler disavows the "reduction of performativity to performance" and Sedgwick's reading of the centrality of drag as metaphor and paradigm in *Gender Trouble*, Butler seems to leave the options open by using terms like "mime", "theatricality of gender", "hyperbolic gesture" and "acting out." For me the etymological and homonymic overlap of performative and performance carries as much weight as psychoanalytic and deconstructionist hair-splitting. Thus, although I would like to focus primarily on performance in the sense of collaborative self-expressivity of a theatrical order— which to avoid confusion I will henceforth call "performance", between theatrical quotation marks— I fear that I too shall ultimately end up in "performativity", in Nichols' sense of documentary as an utterance that transforms, engages, reorients and executes.

Realism and "Performance": from Public to Private

"Ain't nothing like the real thing, baby."

-song overlaid on climactic montage of anal penetration shots in *Erotikus* (1972).

This film is about who lesbian mothers and their children really are.

-prefatory credit, *In the Best Interests of the Children* (1977, my emphasis)

In the field of documentary or cinema— the index of reality is somewhat more reliable, and ... we at least have the advantage of experiencing not actors impersonating gay types, but the real thing...

-Lee Atwell (1978).

What I would now like to show is how, during the post-Stonewall famine

years, many lesbian and gay documentarists did not rely on the real thing. To a remarkable extent they eschewed the standard documentary realism of the day, the available documentary repertoire of interactive idiom. Like cinematic realisms of any period, interactive realism, the formulaic mix of interviews and archival footage joined by the mortar of observational  $\neq$  and musical interludes, was basically invisible to the audience of the seventies and invariably led to Oscar nominations for films like *Union Maids* and to those characteristic reviews of documentary that talk solely about content rather than form. This seventies realism was bent right out of shape by bent filmmakers. In both Europe and North America, lesbian and gay documentary evolved a wide spectrum of distinctive "performance" strategies, idioms of subject self-expression—verbal, dramatic, cinematic and sexual—that were both an answer to, and an explanation of, the invisibility that we felt. Documentary realism may have seemed adequate to visualize other fixable identities it would construct and cement, mix and match, in the seventies—"worker", "visible minority", "third world subaltern", above all "[straight] woman"—but it wasn't up to the job for us.

For a new political constituency characterized by both invisibility of social existence and fluidity and hybridity of identities, the day's realist consensus seemed to break down. Lesbian and gay documentarists seemed intuitively to prefer artificial and hyperbolic "performance" discourses that pushed through/ beyond the realist codes, that "[put] the referential aspect of the message in brackets, under suspension," as Nichols would put it. The extent to which they did so and the particular "performance" formats they chose depended on whether the films treated public spaces of political mobilization, the semi-public territory of traditional social networks and sexual undergrounds, or the private spaces of domesticity, relationships, sexuality and fantasy.

Public Space: The everyday performance discourses of lesbian/gay public life as it emerged after Stonewall (marches, parades, demonstrations, press conferences, zaps, electoral campaigns, concerts, raids, trials) were handily recorded intra-diegetically through realist codes. Hence the parade/march genre of which two pioneering 1972 films offer prototype glimpses, Kenneth Robinson's *Some of Your Best Friends* and Jan Oxenberg's *Home Movie*. Bressan's jubilant, sunlit *Gay U.S.A.* is the most fully developed example, and the angry nighttime demonstrations of Toronto (*Track Two*), Sydney (*Witches and Faggots*, *Dykes and Poofers*) and San Francisco (*The Times of Harvey Milk*) amount to a contrapuntal negative image. Most of the films of this genre couldn't seem to get over the novelty of visible queer public life, which had after all had been unthinkable in the previous decade. When Pier Paolo Pasolini had made his documentary on sexuality in Italy in 1964, *Comizi d'amore*, he approached the private subject of sexuality primarily through that most public of documentary strategies, the televisual "crowd-in-the-street" interview. No wonder that gays were entirely invisible, including gay Pasolini himself.

Two decades later in 1984, *Before Stonewall*, our attempt through the

interactive compilation-interview format to retrieve the social history (in the U.S.) of the same period explored by Pasolini, came up with only one or two cinematic documents of public life—most memorably a dignified procession of New York drag queens into a paddy wagon and the lonely shots of the 1965 Mattachine demonstration in front of the White House. The same year, *The Times of Harvey Milk* is such a breakthrough in the homo history genre because of the wealth of audio-visual documentation of newly visible gay public life in the late seventies and early eighties, especially of mainstream electoral politics. These shifts from public invisibility to visibility also account for the staggering difference between von Praunheim's two films of this period: *It is Not the Homosexual* was shot entirely in "performance" modes in 1970 (scripting, sets, dramatization,... makeup!), while *Army of Lovers*, shot several years later, was then able to mix a "performance" shell (agitprop street theater) with strong realist inscriptions of the gay public life that had surged into U.S. streets (observational  $\neq$ rit $\neq$ , stock shots, interviews, etc.).

For alternative and radical politics in the same period, the resources of interactive realism were less reliable. Political theater was sometimes captured intra-diegetically through observational  $\neq$ rit $\neq$  (zoomy and swishy), as in an early zap of a convention of aversion therapists immortalized in *Some of Your Best Friends* (1971). Otherwise, von Praunheim's *Army* is probably typical in that statements by movement radicals are self-consciously static and anemic, leaving the real vigor of radical gay liberation for self-consciously theatrical agitprop skits by the Gay Sweatshop troupe. Their *Pink Satin Bombers* camp it up in front of the Meat Rack and undercut the political agenda of "700 leather bars and the right to serve in the army." In *Blackstar: Autobiography of a Close Friend*, Tom Joslin likewise turned to "performance," not only for vigor and camp but also for the utopian rhetoric of radical politics, letting his lover Mark declaim a gay lib manifesto, literally from the rooftops, alone in a wintry landscape, a long take long shot at once parodic and straight. In one of Barbara Hammer's few films that deal with public space, *Superdyke*, the artist orchestrates a "performance" of excess, parody and artifice: Amazon warriors take over urban space and assault its institutional and commercial fortresses (e.g. Macy's) on a rampage of street theatre repossession.

**Semi-Public Spaces.** For depicting the traditional semi-visible social networks of bars and parties, and the coded male sexual underground of toilets, baths, parks, and street cruising, "performance" techniques were de rigueur—even though observational  $\neq$ rit $\neq$  might have been deployed, given the advances in portable equipment and sensitive color stocks that other seventies documentarists took for granted. Though the semi-public sites of community building, socialization and political resistance are at the center of same-sex histories (as recalled by the recent genre of lesbian herstory bar films, *Forbidden Love: Unashamed Stories of Lesbian Lives*, *Last Call at Maud's*, and Margaret Westcott's *Stolen Moments* [1996]), they are zones fraught with tension and hyper-sensitivities—ethical, logistical and technical (from

smoke, darkness and loud music to unintentional outing). I can't think of a single bar scene developed through observational ~~v~~~~rit~~ or interactive realism in the entire corpus, although *We All Have Our Reasons* does construct a bar scene in well-rehearsed simulated ~~v~~~~rit~~, and *Before Stonewall* stages a bar reunion of original participants who intra-diegetically "perform" old songs and rituals.

In *It is Not the Homosexual*, Von Praunheim sets up flamboyantly stylized "performance" scenes of parties and bars, only to denounce them with his shrill voice-over their undercurrents of self-hatred. The most appealing bar scene in the film, in a neighborhood hangout populated by drag queens, mixed-race couples, leathermen, and other salt of the earth who "don't feel comfortable in piss-elegant bars", is bursting with transvestite yodelling and other "performance" excess. But it is in this populist crossroads that the "desperate and lonely" allegorical hero meets his ideological prince, who leads him back home to his anarchist Wohngemeinschaft. In this urban commune the hero discovers the anarchist Alternative and von Praunheim accidentally discovers women's movement documentary style: a circle discussion of thirtysomething longhaired nude chainsmokers lounging on pastel comforters consciousness-raise about the self-hatred of ghetto and underground, seguing into Gay Lib rhetoric. But this realist vision of community is ultimately as "performed" as the garish scenes of alienation, simulated sincerity rather than high artifice.

The ghetto sauvage of parks, toilets and bathhouses was even more of a challenge to documentarists than the bars. Sites of state terrorism and social violence as well as sexual community, they obviously required highly contrived dramatization: *Some of Your Best Friends* reenacted police entrapment in a park, to which the victim's resistance became the interactive denouement of the film; a decade later *Track Two* reconstructed the infamous police raids on Toronto bathhouses that triggered the community mobilization recorded for the rest of the film in standard realism. But a much shorter film is the real gem of the underground subgenre, abjuring realist imagery in toto: Michael McGarry's *In Black and White* encapsuled the private space of the public toilet with abstractly visualized closeup carnality, terror and resistance, laid under a "documentary" montage of conflicting public social voices, a Vancouver version of Pasolini's crowd-in-the-street chorus.

Von Praunheim's stunning toilet queerbashing scene in *It is Not the Homosexual* is part of the fresco of explorations of the sexual underground of both commercial baths and non-commercial parks in his work. Toilets, parks and streets are here the on-location settings for Brechtian agitprop and "the tense choreography of men", at once austere and expressionist, all anchored in historical space through Rosa's run-on voice-over denunciation. In *Army*, von Praunheim, changing his tune as well as his continent, is now a non-judgmental libertine, acting as on-camera guide to the underworld as the camera follows him cruising Central Park, the Piers and the Trucks, inspecting a Manhattan bathhouse (where not surprisingly the Underground has been appropriated and commercialized in the Glory Hole Room), or accompanying John Rechy on a



nostalgia-and-leather-decked vrit# prowl through some nighttime city, lamenting the subversive undergrounds of yore. The ideological evasions of voice and the complicitous voyeurism of this realist format have actually made *Army* seem more dated than von Praunheim's earlier high artifice.

Jan Oxenberg's *Comedy in Six Unnatural Acts* (1975) matches *It is not the Homosexual* and *In Black and White* in its full deployment of "performance" (not a flicker of documentary realism). Oxenberg was not "performing" subterranean debauchery, but rather another kind of border zone between public and private: lesbians' subcultural myths, fantasies and appropriations of mainstream cultural baggage (from child molester stereotypes to romance). Oxenberg's skits are just as self-consciously theatrical as von Praunheim's but her indulgent and affectionate humor effectively engaged communal approval rather than the almost unanimous outrage that *It is not the Homosexual's* distancing effects sparked from gay audiences. *Comedy* became one of the few lesbian films of the famine years to attain genuinely canonical status at the time, and when PBS balked at the intimacy of its subcultural circuitry, pretexting amateurism, the corporation seemed surprised by the outcry and had to back off.

*Private Spaces*: Consciousness-raising documentaries from the women's movement provided a language to post-Stonewall lesbian and gay documentarists for dealing with private life and the domestic sphere. But those who availed themselves of it were not all as successful as *In the Best Interests of the Children*, which became the best received and most circulated realist lesbian documentary of the period through its instrumentalist focus on the heartstring single issue of custody. Otherwise, trying to express "the personal is political" through realist codes was often a frustrating experience, especially with filmmakers unable to afford the shooting ratios of Wiseman and Kopple. *Word is Out* scored by its epic vision of cultural and class diversity, relying on the comprehensiveness of its interviews and animated by the feature-length confessional narrativity of "coming out" (see below). But by 1980 films of this nature were being disparaged, and not only against ideological checklists that constituted so much movement film criticism of the day. The pioneering lesbian film theorist Caroline Sheldon had already challenged "the assumption of film as 'pure' objective recording device" in 1977 (when as an afterthought she listed five documentaries that constituted a "start" for lesbian political cinema), and Jacquelyn Zita took up the thread in 1981, lambasting "the pretended truth of objective documentaries," "the operatic confessionals of personal life" and the "talking heads" of political documentary". Quite simply, the anti-stereotype rhetoric of positive images, role models and community enfranchisement didn't always fit realist documentary idioms, whether observational or interactive, that had evolved in order to communicate the texture of individual experience and were weighted with a liberal heritage of voyeurism and victim aesthetics. Films deploying collaborative and expressive "performance" seemed to surmount this problem, especially those dealing with the past or present private space of personal identities and relationships, with sons, daughters and lovers (the alternative

families of friends are mostly missing from the period's documentary iconography, especially on the gay male side—perhaps they didn't match pre-existing cinematic iconography as readily as parents and lovers).

Barbara Hammer's films, known throughout the seventies within the women's constituency to which they were then restricted, and later by mixed audiences, were exemplary for conveying the give and take of sexual passion and exchange, relationships and rupture. They did so not only through the highly stylized editing and image processing she absorbed from her avant-garde mentors and peers, but also through the "performance" of bodily and facial acrobatics. *Double Strength* and *Synch Touch*, for example, enact erotic vocabularies that are respectively balletic and gestural, based on a collaborative interaction by Hammer and her lover of the moment. Whereas a few of her films that deal with the public and semi-public space of lesbian collective politics seem trapped in their time and space—at least to those of my students for whom "seventies West Coast" is pejorative critical shorthand, the sex and relationship films are fresh and inventive.

Joslin's *Blackstar* bravely tackles not only connubial intimacy but also familial stress. In contrast to the evasive father and controlling mother we have already met, the filmmaker's complicitous elder brother offers a jovial ~~vrit~~ monologue, but its phony spontaneity is unmasked when the editor includes all three takes. There are more stiff theatricality and more open wounds in Susana Blaustein's approach to similar territory, *Susana*. The film lines up frontal declarations "performed" by the author-protagonist's sister, ex-lover and parents; only the tearful pleading sister, the sardonic lover, and brutal Susana ("No, Father, ... You kept telling me to imitate my sister...") are actually visualized, while the parents are mercifully provided only in voice-over sound. If "performance" opens wounds in *Susana*, it heals them in *Michael a Gay Son*, which rechannels familial trauma by casting the protagonist's peers as his parents and siblings in role-playing improvisations of rejections and reconciliations.

As Hammer's and Blaustein's films demonstrated fully, lovers are often more co-operative than parents. *Word is Out*'s realist lovers perform indulgent smiles beside the narrator at the mike, or obligingly cuddling on domestic sofas or lawns. In contrast, Joslin's Mark Massi is bristlingly aware of the inadequacies of cinematic realism for capturing the essence of his relationship with the filmmaker and the film is full of self-reflexive chatter about its uselessness:

Mark, cu: What about us? I mean this isn't us, and I'm kind of I feel bad that I'm afraid that we're not going to get us in the film.

Tom: What is that?

Mark: It's those seven years that we shared together, the love that held us together —you know the life and things we share.

Tom: What's missing?

Mark: This is a construction for a film....

Tom: Yes, no, you keep saying, we keep saying it has to come out

in dialogue because there's no way to do it visually... And you keep saying maybe there's nothing between us because we can't find any way of doing it visually and I think that's worth pursuing.

Mark: OK Pursue. I'll follow.

Tom: Tell me Mark, do you think there's nothing between us?

Mark: There doesn't seem anything that we can do visually, that's for sure, right?

Tom: There's nothing visible between us?

Mark: Maybe.

Tom: So there's something invisible between us?

Mark: Christ. Stop it. ... I wanted just to show what we were like, and that's where we ran into vacancy...

The crisis within the realist effort to render a private partnership--"running into vacancy"--is crystallized in the above wonderful bedroom dialogue in which the partners improvise with a prop, namely a spaghetti-like mass of out-take trims that have literally come "between" them. And when the couple finally agrees on "performance" ("planning something out") as a means of expressing the invisible element of their relationship, what to do? Sex is too highly charged to perform for the camera, except a little discreet cuddling under the sheets and realist dialogue also went nowhere fast. Thus vaudeville banter and a two-minute disco pas de deux to a Laura Nyro song, climaxing in a presentational pose and kiss for the camera, were chosen to conclude this film. This "performance" scene would be recycled in a similar place fifteen years later in Joslin's posthumous *Silverlake Life: The View from Here*, summing up the relationship once and for all but now in the before-and-after iconographical context of AIDS memorialization--the flashback of an artist who has just shown his own death.

### Coming Out

I'm coming out now, right? Here I am on television.

Big white face on the screen saying `Yeah, you know, I'm gay!' --Pat Bond, in *Word is Out* (1977)

The Stonewall generation's political ritual of coming out mixed private and public, "outed" the personal and thereby transgressed the social silence around sexuality and difference. Traditionally it had been the queen and the butch who had played this transgressive role in pre-Stonewall public life as well as in representation (the sixties had been the great decade of queens on documentary, from Warhol to *Portrait of Jason*). However in the seventies, the transgressive role was to be played not by the queen, who was quickly shuffled offstage by the positive-image agenda of liberation politics (re-appearing only in the eighties), but by the assimilationist lesbian/gay who was by definition invisible and therefore required to speak his or her transgression.

One might expect that realist modes were more appropriate than theatrical "performance" for capturing this confessional moment because of its premise of spontaneity and inner authenticity, and indeed interactive realism is often the aesthetic strategy of choice. Yet this ritual is invariably

performed and often "performed". I am referring not only to some of the most expressive moments of the coming out repertory, where interviewees intra-diegetically perform gestural amplifications of their narratives, for example Pat Bond swaggering through the role of worldly military dyke or butch Dorothy Hillaire in *Before Stonewall* showing the camera how she literally booted harassers across a bar thirty years earlier. I am referring also to the ritualized, premeditated quality of the coming out performances, invariably delivered by a preselected (and pre-videotaped in the case of *Word is Out*) subject in close collaborative relationship with the filmmakers, moment and place propitiously chosen (usually beside a houseplant).

Not only does coming out require the interactive mode of interview and monologue by its very nature, but its confessional operation also requires the presence of the spectator, mediated by camera and crew. This operation thus posits performance but also performativity in the linguistic sense, describing one's identity of outness as well as executing it. It is performative also in Nichols' sense, making the viewer who is engaged by the on-camera confession the documentary referent, not only the speaker. This was assumed by Pat Bond's laughing confession in *Word is Out* (above) and by Bruce White whose voice on a sixties radio broadcast replayed in *Before Stonewall* says, not laughingly, that not only his family will find out, but

"I'm quite certain that I will probably lose my job as a result of the program too... I hope that through this means I can be some use to someone else other than myself."

These two speakers of different periods know that they are enacting as well as signifying a relationship—cultural, affective and political—with the viewer.

Coming out involved transgression of the public-private divide, as I said, but even its transgressive power became formulaic. Films such as the staid Advocate production *Who Happen to be Gay* (1979), for all their instrumentality in the political context of the 1970s, were also the ones most complicit in social invisibility and in the rote recapitulation of the interactive recipe (interview/snapshots/observational rock-climbing interlude/interview/workplace interlude/interview). The more these films began to pile up after 1980, the more they deserved Dyer's complaints about "hidden agendas", the erasure of "conflict, contradiction and difficulty" and "the quest for sameness", a concomitant sprawling and repetitiveness, an avoidance of both analysis and the problematization of representation and identity.

Is it for this reason that there evolved highly theatricalized "performance" variants of the coming out formula, from Oxenberg's own cryptic juggling act in the "non-monogamy" sketch in *Comedy* to the explicit self-scripted and self-costumed monologues in *L'Aspect rose de la chose*, in which each character controlled his own identity "performance"? It is not simply a question of invoking the theatricality of the gay sensibility here—though there is a distinguished literature on camp and theatricality within gay cultures that is worth reclaiming, once we have separated the essential from the essentialist. Beyond such generalities, the style and substance of "performances" and their meanings in particular contexts must be situated and

deciphered. But the memorable queen who stole Aspect rose from her fellow collective members with flounces and fabrics was prophetic. For, as the effect of seventies positive images and realism wore off, coming out "performances" would become all the more prevalent in our nonfiction and would increasingly deploy, not rock-climbing, but more and more of what Sedgwick calls "flaming" lesbian and gay "performative identity vernaculars": "butch abjection, femmitude, leather, pride, SM, drag, musicality, fisting, attitude, zines, histrionicism, asceticism, Snap! culture, diva worship, florid religiosity.... activism."

### Cumming Out

I would like to single out a particular tradition of coming out "performances" that is erotic. Evolving from the very beginning of the seventies was a whole subgenre of autobiographical sex "performance" films, recharging the power of coming out both as "performance" and as "performativity." In view of criticism already current during the seventies about the censorship of sexuality by documentaries, it is surprising to rediscover how frequent and brazen the self-erotic imagery of the decade really was. I have written elsewhere of the extraordinary achievement of Curt McDowell's diaristic *Loads*, with its multi-partner performance of erotic lifestyle and fantasy. In fact Hammer matched the on-camera authorial oral pleasuring administered by the nimble McDowell four years earlier in *Women I Love* (1976) and one-upped him with a seventies-style lesbian reciprocity ("you-do-me-I-do-you") that McDowell's trade partners wouldn't dream of. Hammer's extreme closeup labial diddling in *Multiple Orgasms* and *Women I Love* effectively symbolizes in retrospect the utopian moment of the entire post-Stonewall decade. McDowell and Hammer are far from unique, rivalled in their bravado by von Praunheim's sex acts in *Army of Lovers* (he performs a graphic blow job in a filmmaking workshop he is teaching at the San Francisco Art Institute and has mid-interview sex with Fred Halsted, their telephoto encounter framed with flowers and liberation dialogue).

Halsted, author and star in another genre of seventies "documentary", hard core porn, is sex "performer" in the porn milieu's own attempt at the docu-history genre, *Erotikus* (1972), where as on-camera narrator lazily masturbating for the camera he steers us through the porn industry's selective autobiography. Chantal Akerman's *Je tu il elle* acquires a documentary aura around its stunning sex "performance" sequence because of the spectator's knowledge that the author is one of the inexhaustible acrobatic fuckers in the long-take tableau. There was plenty of softcore competition which sometimes seemed equally transgressive, and not only the obligatory "Hi Mom!" kisses for the camera in the parade/march genre. Abundant kissing not only provided the coda to *Blackstar*, but also permeated *Lavender* (whose protagonists "embraced constantly", complained Andrea Weiss in *Jump Cut*) and was the climax to *Blackstar*. *Home Movie* and *Susana* went further, the former with Oxenberg's touch-football pileup seemingly borrowed from the sixties with its substitution of sports for sex, and the latter with its sexy chiaroscuro

stills and its dramatized shots of topless cuddling, faces obscured and breasts caressed by long straight seventies hair.

The sex "performance" extrapolations of the coming out ritual executed a complex, even troubled, performativity. On-camera erotic behavior both described and enacted the confrontational track of identity politics, an in-your-face alternative to the assimilationist politics of invisibility. Not only did private meet public, but genres clashed as well, the erotic and the documentary. The viewer's arousal exacerbated his or her sense of disturbance in genre expectations; documentary tact is flouted as thoroughly as erotic fantasy is both intensified and deflated. The spectator is engaged, linguistically, politically and affectively, but also physiologically. Minority politics is not only asserted but is also "performed" as a sexual exchange and challenge.

### Shots from a Queer Canon

"Performance" was thus a primary aesthetic of 1970s lesbian and gay documentary, an idiom of theatricality, self-expressivity and mise-en-sc...ne that ultimately was politically, culturally, erotically and affectively "performative"... But my conception of seventies documentary is not a monolithic or unitary one, far from it: famine or no famine, a rich diversity of cultural roots, aesthetic strategies and ideological negotiations resists efforts to reduce or generalize about this important moment in the history of New Social Movements in the West and its traces in the medium of social change par excellence. One can risk the following generalization however: those documentaries closest in organizational links or sensibility to gay and/or lesbian movement agendas are those that remain most anchored to the prescribed realist discourses of seventies documentary and were most visible in movement and community media at the time. Unfortunately many of these seem proportionally less important now in retrospect, rightly or wrongly. It is no accident that the films of Joslin, von Praunheim, Oxenberg and Hammer and the others that stand up well in this retroactive view with their inventive and prophetic use of "performance" are autobiographical. Yet autobiographical and erotic discourses were liabilities in the original political context, and many films of this nature were undervalued or at the very least controversial. Even Joslin complained on-camera about "navel-gazing"  $\neq$   $\neq$ . Prejudices against autobiography and avant-garde practices did prevent important nonfiction work from reaching their full audience, especially those films whose non-realist use of "performance" was seen as an avant-garde mannerism blocking accessibility to the gay and lesbian masses who preferred positive images and realist convention.

Even without these cultural biases, as Nichols explains, performative documentary by definition runs the risk of misunderstanding. Part of the blockage is the way audiences are confronted with shifting borders between fiction and nonfiction. And indeed the "performance" films I have privileged in this analysis necessitate a retroactive expansion in the definition of documentary. At the time who would have called It is not the Homosexual or

Oxenbergs Comedy "documentaries?" But now the post-Stonewall generation's documentary image of itself cannot be separated from films that were then marginalized as dramatized, experimental, weird, personal, short, fictional, politically incorrect, amateurish, divisive, pornographic and inaccessible. In fact if Nichols is right in identifying performative documentary as the key mode of the nineties, the lesbian and gay "performance" documentaries of the seventies must be reclaimed not only as the key to our past but the key to the present.

Who says reclamation and redefinition says canon. My post-post-Stonewall queer students of the nineties who watched the seventies documentaries I showed them in stoney silence were not only generational chauvinists (and admittedly the captive audience of a nostalgic and unimaginative teacher). They also saw themselves, I think, as canon-busters, queer iconoclasts criticizing the complacent legacy of lesbian and gay Baby Boomers. They may have been right, but busting a non-existent canon, fragmented and fragile in its original famine environment, may be a waste of energy. Only a few documentaries from the seventies are available on video and the texts that are constituting our cultural history, such as *The Celluloid Closet*, *Queer Looks* and *Vampires and Violets* jump over much of this generation's artistic and political practice. (Vito Russo, for example, referred three times to *Word is Out* but only in terms of content, never in relation to its own cultural importance as the antidote to *Cruising* and *La Cage aux Folles*, while Andrea Weiss never even mentions the title). A canon of post-Stonewall documentaries may be exactly what we need. Challenging queer amnesia is not only a question of restoring our cultural history, our performances and our "performances" of the post-Stonewall years. Nor only a question of preventing young video queers from reinventing the wheel. With the funding crises and political backlash of the nineties, the threat of famine is back, and glimpses of our performances during earlier famines may help us get through the next one.

### Illustrations

1. Pat Bond swaggering through Word is Out: expressive "performance" in a realist documentary.
2. Susana: topless erotic "performance" insert.
3. Blackstar: Autobiography of a Close Friend: a) Massi's rooftop ideological "performance;" b) the film that "comes between" the lovers; c) the lovers "perform" a dance; d) then a kiss.

### Endnotes

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